

# Knights of Labor

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The Webbs, on whose ideology, Labour History has been fashioned, argued that lodge 'ceremonies' were used by the British 'trade-unionists' as an artifice of stage-management to impress unsophisticated newcomers. To them, the Tolpuddle labourers were merely 'playing with oaths.'<sup>1</sup> Under this Webb treatment the organisational function of the rite simply disappears, it is undeserving of any further exploration. The oaths cannot, therefore, be part of a living culture reflective of the needs, anxieties, expectations or desires of the people using them. They have no history of any significance and are only a temporary aberration in the evolution of 'the trade union movement.'

Without such a living culture, for there to be 'real' trade unions, only a belief in certain arbitrary, organisational 'points' is needed to acquire the necessary consciousness. Commitment and belief in this organisational 'type' becomes the sine qua non of 'class consciousness.'

The Webbs appear to believe that the whole ritual package was abandoned if not immediately then shortly after 1834, the year of the Tolpuddle trial, but have found few supporting statements to this effect, and these relating most clearly to oath-taking.<sup>2</sup> If oaths, regalia, initiations, etc, did actually cease at that time under duress, lost popularity or became irrelevant, the same package should not have reached the 'labour movement' in the USA or New South Wales decades after that date, which it did.

Very interestingly for this author who has looked closely at the Knights of Labor, the Webbs assert that the GNCTU

closely resembles in its *Trade Union features*, the well known "Knights of Labor" ... for some years one of the most powerful labour organisations in the world' and whose place was taken by the American Federation of Labour, with *exclusively Trade Union objects*.<sup>3</sup>

It is not clear to me what 'Trade Union features' or 'objects' might mean but the Knights began life in 1869 as 'The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor'. As a 'purely and deeply secret organisation' it drew heavily on (US) Freemasonry for its ideas and procedures.<sup>4</sup> All of this is spelt out by the author to whom the Webbs refer, though the Webbs themselves make no mention of the Knight's origins or context. That man, Carroll Wright, who was at the time US Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor, went on to say that a major change took place in 1881 when the Order's General Assembly, agreed that for the first time the KOL's name and objects would be made public and its initiating *oaths* abolished. Wright does not emphasise the fact that significant amounts of the *Knight's ritual* actually continued, including the use of a square altar and a red triangular altar.

The long time leader of the K o L, Terence Powderly, was a devout Christian and an open Bible was always present during meetings of the Assembly. He had earlier been a member of the 'Industrial Brotherhood' which had its own ritual, probably also based on what they had experienced in Freemasonry since it coalesced with and passed on its Preamble and Constitution to the emerging K o L. His autobiography includes references to other 'trade unions', the 'Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers', the 'Order of Machinists' which had an emblem very similar to that of

Freemasonry and to the 'Knights of St Crispin' which was the 'combination' for shoemakers.<sup>5</sup> It is this ubiquity of, shall we say, fraternalist indicators which ought to have set Labour Historians in Australia thinking long before this.

I don't accept that Freemasonry was the ultimate source of the Knight's lodge practices, but the evidence for that must not detain us here. Suffice to note that the co-founders all belonged to a number of fraternal organisations besides the Freemasons, one, for example, being in the Pythians, the Odd Fellows, the Improved Order of Red Men, the Royal Arcanum and the Order of the Golden Cross. Powderly was in the Workingmens Benevolent Association, the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Irish Land League all of which drew on the original guild model.<sup>6</sup>

Although 'fraternalism' has also been neglected in the US, compared to this country there have been a lot more attempts to take the phenomenon seriously. And just as the few Australian authors who have bothered to look at primary material have been surprised and impressed with benefit societies recent US scholars have asserted their cultural and political significance. Take Robert Weir's 1996 *Beyond Labor's Veil*. Almost in passing he notes that 'fraternal orders' were 'deeply rooted' in American culture, that by 1901 there were more than 600 such societies in existence and that cities like Albany, Newark, Philadelphia and others have recently been shown to have been 'crisscrossed by fraternal networks as was the entire State of Missouri.'<sup>7</sup>

Weir agrees that before 1882 the Knights' fraternalism was marked by secret ritualistic behaviour, and orally-circulated 'secret knowledge', while after 1882 their culture was more diffuse, open, public and literary. In 1883 the titles of the K o L central executive were altered from 'Grand' to 'General', viz, from 'Grand Master Workman', 'Grand Secretary', 'Grand Treasurer', 'Grand Venerable Sage', 'Grand Worthy Foreman', and 'Grand Unknown Knight', etc to 'General Master Workman', etc.<sup>8</sup> But Weir argues that the growth and political significance of the Knights cannot be understood if the ritualism is ignored and that the dropping of ritual was a major reason for the internal collapse of what was in 1886 a million-strong, national labour organisation. He notes that in the 1890s surviving Knights returned to the oath-bound ritual and secrecy of the first phase and that 'long after labour fraternalism (had) faded as actual practice, it continued to shape' the labour movements' debates, policies and values.

The Knights evolved out of the reconstituted Garment Cutters' Association as the logical, perhaps the only next stage from the disarray of 1850s trade unionism. Weir asserts that

the founders dreamed of moving beyond the limits of 'bread and butter' unionism by creating an oppositional culture based on the brotherhood of all toilers.<sup>9</sup>

The Knight's key public attribute was, in fact, its inclusiveness. Sixty thousand (white?) women workers enrolled in the 1880s, including Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton, while by 1887 there were 90,000 black workers enrolled.

Not all of these members were impressed with being in the Knights, indeed the enormous increases in membership after the successful action against Jay Gould in 1885 exposed the

executive to increased questioning for which they were largely unprepared. Weir believes the female members were indifferent to even the reduced ritual, but that the lodge practices were exactly what brought in the African Americans, many of whom stayed after the Knights had gone into decline. He quotes one scholar who has written:

Well-versed in secrecy and ritual (African Americans) were attuned to symbolism and to the 'inner workings' of the Order. They expanded their experience with self-organisation, self-education, and self-government and integrated these new experiences into their own social and intellectual frame of reference.<sup>10</sup>

A central Knights' value was that of 'brotherhood'. While its many positive traits – family duty, personal integrity and responsibility, honesty and activism – can be appreciated this principle was invoked more in its masculine aspects of knightly honour and manly courage than in its universal aspect. Weir notes that while the Knights were attracted to the mediaeval codes of chivalry they were not deeply anti-modernist as some 19th century fraternal orders were. Rather they had a suspicion of industrial capitalism and sought to protect and rebuild the communities and the community spirit they saw being eroded. The Knight's founder, Stephens, saw the job of the fraternity to be

of knitting up into a compact and homogeneous amalgamation all the workers in one universal brotherhood, guided by the same rules, working by the same methods, practising the same forms for accomplishing the same ends ... it calls for an end to wage-slavery and the elimination of the great anti-Christ of civilisation manifest in the idolatry of wealth and the consequent degradation and social ostracism of all else.<sup>11</sup>

In these terms the subsequent embrace by the labour movement of centralised and bureaucratic organisation can be seen as a logical progression out of what to some appears to be a throw-back to archaic practices.

The collapse of the Knights was also due in a major way to the onslaughts of capitalists after 1885 and financial woes induced by its sudden inrush of members. Further, throughout the eighties it was an organisation attempting to accommodate 'assorted Marxists, Lasalleans, anarchists, syndicalists and free thinkers' as well as numerous varieties of feminists, temperance advocates, and ritualists.

As I've said, Terence Powderly, the Knights leader during the Order's rise and fall, was the key advocate of the significant shift to making the Order's affairs public. He was not anti-ritual, indeed he died a 33 Degree Freemason. Rather he understood that ritual was central to what the Knights saw as its role of educating its members about political economy and their position in society. He also knew that secret signs and passwords were necessary and had to continue no matter how 'public' the Order was. But he was a devout Catholic and was attempting to defuse the attacks coming from Catholic clergy which were impeding recruiting. Catholicism, of course, resembles the most patriotic, Tory authorities in its dislike of other people's 'secret societies'. It does so only because it cannot control those whose beliefs are hidden from it, and which are therefore threatening.

In short, Weir argues, and I agree, that benefit society ritual elicited emotional and psychic responses which the more materialist and secular labour organisations could not, and did not. He notes that Powderly and Samuel Gompers were both living proofs of the fact that 'once ingrained on the individual psyche, fraternalism put down deep roots.' In 1917 when asked to join the Knights of Columbus, Powderly refused and stormed out of the Catholic Church for good, saying: 'If it was wrong for the Order of the Knights of Labor to be a secret society in 1879, it cannot be right for the Knights of Columbus to be a secret society in 1917.' Samuel

Gompers was initiated a Knight in 1873, and though his long career of labour activism took him well away from the Knights his 'devotion to secrecy was a point of pride. "I am unwilling to give the nature of the obligation ... " That is he refused to reveal the nature of his oath. "...for since I assumed (it) I have never violated it." '<sup>12</sup>

W.W. Lyght brought the Knights of Labor secretly to Australia by first establishing an Assembly at Wagga in approx 1890, and one at Sydney in 1891. In my MA thesis on the role of anarchists and anarchism in the heady days of the 1890s in Sydney and Melbourne I was able to make few connections between home-grown activists and WW Lyght and so the Knights of Labor appear there only as incidental colour. Today I feel that the almost absolute invisibility of this 'WW Lyght' figure itself suggests a closer look might be in order.

At the present time, however, how long the Wagga and/or the Sydney Assembly, or any network of Assemblies, lasted is doubtful but the membership of the Freedom Assembly, Sydney, from 1891-93, included many well-known labour-movement figures – William Lane, Ernie Lane, Arthur Rae, George Black, Frank Cotton, JC Fitzpatrick, WG Spence, WH McNamara, Henry Lawson and Donald Cameron. That it operated as a secret society is clear, but how much of the US-derived ritual set out in documents was used is not. Codes and Passwords were certainly used. Titles apparently used in meetings included Master Workman, Worthy Foreman, and Past and District Master Workman. These titles are standard lodge practice, so replacing 'Grand' with 'General' doesn't take us very far. The 'Secret Work and Instructions' contains directions for passing through Outer and Inner Veils, for hand-signs and excluding strangers, and for ritual use of the globe, lance, triangles, circles and other shapes. These are all explained in Weir's book. The 'Inner' and 'Outer Veils', for example, are terms for the ante-room and the main lodge room used to maintain secrecy. The lance and the globe, besides having various symbolic significances, were objects placed outside the one room or the other indicating the 'lodge' was in session.

The Knight's Great Seal (illustrate) was explained only to long-time devotees. Weir's summary is: The inner-most lines of the equilateral triangle signified humanity, man's relationship to the Creator, and the three elements essential to man's existence and happiness – land, labour and love. They were also emblematic of 'production, consumption and exchange.' The hemisphere represented the KOL's North American birthplace, and the inscription denoted that the first Grand Assembly of January 1878 was the ninth year the *Adelphon Kruptos* (ie, *Secret Brotherhood* the name given to the ritual booklet) was in effect. Prytaneum was a Latin word referring to a dining hall used by the Knights as the place all looked towards. The inner unbroken circle represented the 'unbroken circle of universal brotherhood' while the segments of the Pentagon refer to its five principles: justice, wisdom, truth industry and economy. The next circle, emitting rays of light, referred to the path of learning of all Knights which took them from 'locals' to the Grand Assemblies. Then came the motto 'That is the most Perfect Government in Which an Injury to One is the Concern of All.' Lastly the five points of the star representing the five races of the earth and the five divisions in which the earth is divided.<sup>13</sup>

The Instructions found in Sydney insist:

If there is any sign or portion of a sign, words or symbols, in use in your local different from what you find laid down here, discard the same at once ... It is not official or authorized ... Give nothing that you do not find here, and there will be no trouble from lack of uniformity throughout the Order.<sup>14</sup>

The published Preamble for a Melbourne-based Australasian Knights of Labor, (1893?) shows the names of

leading Knights, who included Dr W. Maloney, MP, alongside initials which can be read as 'Past Master Workman', 'Grand (or General) Master Workman', 'Grand Recording' and 'Grand Financial Secretaries'. A photograph of Dr Maloney and JR Davies for the Knights of Labor shows both wearing 'masonic' collars (see illustration).

My argument is not that the Knights of Labor were a radical aberration, but that they were simply another manifestation of a long-standing and deeply-rooted cultural phenomenon, the breadth and depth of which is still coming to light. This is not to resurrect the arguments about the political significances of 'craft-based' occupations and non-craft-based occupations. The significance of this material is much broader than that.

It is not surprising to me that when the Newcastle branch of the Operative Stonemasons' Society was formed in 1885, 35 masons were 'initiated'<sup>15</sup> or that an apron produced for the Victorian Operative Masons' Society in 1906 is identical with the 'masonic' type.<sup>16</sup> Tylers, or Door Guardians, are referred to in the Rules of Sydney Coal Lumpers, not established until 1882, the Rules of the United General Laborers' Association of Newcastle, 1888, and of the United Laborers' Protective Society of NSW, Newcastle Branch, 1892. This last body lists in its assets for that Year: Banner boxes, Books, Regalia and other lodge Property to the value of £110 (out of a total £146/12/-). In addition to a Tyler the Rules of the Australasian Association of Operative Plasterers, NSW ('a grand universal bond of brotherhood' est. 1886) show for initiation of new members a catechism-form of questions and answers, strongly reminiscent of Masonic initiations.<sup>17</sup> Photographs of the Broken Hill Executive of the FEDFA for 1913 show all wearing the same type of embossed collar or sash as for Masonic or Friendly Society ceremonials, the only differences being the FEDFA initials.<sup>18</sup> As with the Temperance groups the 'masonic' aprons have disappeared. At the laying of the foundation stone by Ben Tillett of the Broken Hill Trades Hall in 1898 'masonic' collars and sashes were worn by officials of the Committee.

Up to the 1960s in Australia the AEU and the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders were swearing in all apprentices and new members with an oath, sufficiently similar to be labelled 'masonic.'

Whatever the peaks and troughs, the evidence certainly points to a gathering of circumstances around the turn of the 19th/20th century predisposing working people to re-affirm their need for the bundle of beliefs and practices here labelled 'masonic', that is, not just to the beliefs but to the actual practices of what is today understood as Freemasonry.

At the turn of the century enormous heat was being generated within Protestant churches over 'ecclesiastical ornaments and haberdashery'<sup>19</sup> and one of the more forthright protagonists, the Church of England Association reported that *its* church was:

honeycombed with secret societies, guilds and brotherhoods, some under episcopal patronage, yet all secretly instilling the false doctrine of soul-destroying error that underlies Romish ritualism ... Ritualists were unanglican, unenglish, anti-Reformationist and Anti-Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Given that the 'ritualism' being objected to was a symbol for the power and trappings of High Church hierarchy, the relationship of Masonic iconography or 'Romish ritualism' (or any other kind) to Labour Days might have been an issue to trade unionists whether Catholic or not. In fact, though the Catholic 'fraternities' had the brighter regalia and de-emphasised secrecy these were about the only differences.

It is little known that Methodists and Primitive Methodists, the supposed enemies of sacerdotalism, were often Freemasons. Or that the Methodist Church began in 1914 in

Sydney the 'Methodist Order of Knights' which had Degrees, secret handshakes, knocks and signs, a peculiar method of voting (standing, stamping foot once) and 'Courts'. Ritual was developed quite explicitly to stir and 'grab' the emotions of boys, eight to eighteen, and later adult males, as Knight Commanders. A female version, the Methodist Girls Comradeship also developed with the ranks of Senior Comrade, Elder Comrade, Comrade of Records and Comrade of the Purse, (who all wore Gold Collars) and the Guardians of Good Fellowship, of Ceremonies and of Awards (white collars). The June 1919 *Ritual* shows the Guardian or Order, assisted by the Guardian of the Entrance preparing the room 'as per diagram' which includes the arrangement of the officers' chairs. Various Orders were to identify themselves, as for example, the Order of Minstrelsy, 'Black Harp on Green Ribbon', or Order of the Lambs, 'Order of the Blue Ribbon', etc. Appropriately, the 1923 Amended Constitution of the Methodist Order of Knights was set out exactly as the published Rules of Trade Unions and Friendly Societies were.<sup>21</sup>

Catholic sodalities drew on the same sources for inspiration. The American Knights of Columbus became the Knights of the Southern Cross in Australia where they proliferated after 1918. Hogan has commented: 'Like the Masons the Knights maintained a discipline of secrecy, ritual and membership by invitation.'<sup>22</sup> A former member of both the Masons and the Congregationalist Church's youth section called 'The Companionship' saw 'the set up' in both as the same.<sup>23</sup>

Then, membership of Friendly Societies where ritual was also strong was at its peak, and these were men, in the main, but whether men or women, they were almost entirely working people. Finally, to brotherly observers back 'home' the enthusiasm in the colonies for 'the forms and ceremonies' of what some knew as 'Oddfellowship' seemed 'excessive'.<sup>24</sup> It is not surprising therefore that there is evidence of widespread usage of the 'masonic' hierarchic forms and ritual even within organised groups supposedly in conflict with status and privilege.

Brief newspaper reports show that Court True Freedom, a Newcastle 'lodge' for the Independent Order of Free Thinkers, initiated new members and had ceremonies and markers for ranks and degrees.<sup>25</sup> This ties in with the fact that well-known English free thinker Charles Bradlaugh remained a Freemason all his life, having been initiated into the same lodge of which Karl Marx was a member.

What the author called the secret history of the (First Communist) International asserts:

The IWMA [Industrial Working Men's Association] in Geneva sought and found a temple worthy of their cult ... a Masonic Temple ... which they [Marx, etc] rented. They put the name of 'Temple' on their cards and bills.<sup>26</sup>

Bradlaugh acknowledges having been initiated into the Loge des Philadelphes which is believed to have been Marx's lodge, his 'brothers' including Blanc, Garibaldi and Mazzini. Founded in London in 1850, its initial members were emigres from recognised foreign Orders, which perceived Freemasonry as:

an institution essentially philanthropical, philosophical and progressive. It has for its objects the amelioration of mankind without any distinction of class, colour or opinion, either philosophical, political or religious; for its unchangeable motto: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.<sup>27</sup>

Bradlaugh advocated a 'Freemasonry of no religion' but thought that the European strand was made up of 'revolutionary, anti-clerical, secret societies.' Where he chose from two 'Masonic currents' he saw moving in very opposite directions his one-time lover and fellow free-thinker Annie Besant sought to reform Freemasonry as a whole and helped to establish Co-Masonry.

In 1897 anarchists JA Andrews, Joseph Schellenberg and

John Dwyer founded on their own initiative an Isis Lodge in Sydney and attempted its affiliation with the Theosophical Society in London just when Annie Besant was being installed as 'First Sovereign Lieutenant Grand Commander of the Order of Universal Co-Masonry and Deputy of its Supreme Council for the British Dominions.' Roe has commented in her study of the broad appeal of theosophy in Australia that co-masonry was attractive to female theosophists precisely because with the 'ancient' masonic ritual restored and women freely admitted equally with men, it was a direct response to Madame Blavatsky's urgings for a remodelled Freemasonry. Roe believes that theosophy 'offered not merely reform but reconstruction, and special promise for women.' Nevertheless female members continued to do the cleaning and decorating of lodges and when hostility broke out between founder Madame Blavatsky and Besant the former leader denounced the practice of Freemasonry:

Professedly the most absolute of democracies, it is practically the appanage of aristocracy, wealth and personal ambition.<sup>28</sup>

The occult hierarchy of Theosophy internationally was headed by 'the Elder Brethren' or 'Great White Brotherhood' headed by a trinity representing the Head, the Heart and the Arm.<sup>29</sup> Roe concluded:

(The) elitism of Edwardian social theory found one expression in Mrs Besant, who, like Lenin, was ready and willing to take command under the right conditions.<sup>30</sup>

Furious debates over Freemasonry occurred at the Socialist Congresses of 1906 and 1912,<sup>31</sup> and ideologues determined on a stand at the Fourth International, passing the following resolution:

It is absolutely necessary that the leading elements of the Party should close all channels which lead to the middle classes and should therefore bring about a definite breach with Freemasonry. The chasm which divides the proletariat from the middle classes must be clearly brought to the consciousness of the Communist Party. A small fraction of the leading elements of the Party wished to bridge this chasm and to avail themselves of the Masonic Lodges. Freemasonry is a most dishonest and infamous swindle of the proletariat by the radically inclined section of the middle classes. We regard it our duty to oppose it to the uppermost.<sup>32</sup>

How successful they were remains to be seen.

## Endnotes

- 1 p. 146.
- 2 See p. 182 for general claim about 'unlawful oaths'.
- 3 p. 135.
- 4 C Wright, 'An Historical Sketch of the Knights of Labor', *Quarterly Journal Of Economics*, Jan, 1887, pp. 141-2.
- 5 See T Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, AMS Press, New York, 1968, (orig 1948); pp. 35-38 - his Christianity; p. 42, p. 43, fn6. - Industrial Brotherhood; pp. 47-53, p. 384, pp. 431-440 - ritual and symbols of

- K o L; p. 57 - Knights of St Crispin; p. 230 - C Wright; p. 318 - Order of Machinists; p. 370 - Knights of Columbus.
- 6 R. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, Penn State U, 1996, p. 22.
- 7 Weir, as above, p. 24.
- 8 See Wright as above, p. 143 and p. 155.
- 9 Weir, 1996, as above, p. 9. See his Ch 1 for much of what follows.
- 10 Weir, 1996, p. 46, quoting Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*, p. 157.
- 11 Weir, as above, p. 36.
- 12 Weir, as above, p. 65, p. 35.
- 13 Weir, as above, p. 239.
- 14 For Assembly Documents see *Adelphon Kruptos*, and *Secret Work and Instructions - Knights of Labor* in Mitchell Library, at nos ML366.974/1A1,2A1,3A1. For comparative purposes, see G. Kealey and B. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights Of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900*, CUP, 1982.
- 15 K. Simkus, *Lodge St John, No 115, 1884-1984*, Newcastle, 1984, p. 17.
- 16 See photograph, Reeves, 1988, as above, p. 18.
- 17 Copies, obtained from various sources, in author's collection.
- 18 Original held at FEDFA Office, Broken Hill.
- 19 Broome, 1980, p. 85.
- 20 Broome, 1980, p. 88; see also 'Methodism vs Ritualism', *The Methodist*, 9 Feb, 1901.
- 21 'Methodist Church of Australia', ML MSS Am-123-2. *Methodist Girls' Comradeship* Handbooks showing Ritual, Regalia, Passwords, Signs and Countersigns, Knocks and Counterknocks, etc, were still being issued in 1960.
- 22 Hogan, 1988, p. 200.
- 23 Don McClaren of Dungog, to the author in September, 1992.
- 24 'Editorial', *The Oddfellows' Quarterly Magazine*, (Manchester), Vol XVIII, No 146, Feb, 1887, and 'Friendly Societies in Victoria and New Zealand', Vol XX, No 177, Sept, 1889, p. 276.
- 25 *NMH*, 5 Sept, 1885, 24 August, 1885.
- 26 O Yorke, *The Secret History of the International Working Men's Association*, Geneva, 1871, reprinted 1974 by Revisionist Press, Dublin, p. 66. Copy at 'Geoff Macdonald Collection', NQ4/1413, ANU ABL.
- 27 D Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh*, 1971, p. 63, and referring to Bradlaugh's 1885 pamphlet *What Freemasonry Is ...*
- 28 Roe, 1986, pp. 167, 186, 196.
- 29 Roe, 1986, p. 128.
- 30 Roe, 1986, p. 233.
- 31 See D Lefebvre, 'Macons et anti-macons socialistes (1906-1912)', *L'Ours: Cahiers & Revue*, No 193, 1988.
- 32 Quoted at J Hamill & R Gilbert, *World Freemasonry*, Aquarian, 1991, p. 181.